

The Socio-economic Power-bases of the Thai Bureaucratic Elite*

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INTRODUCTION

Bureaucrats have been playing a very significant role in the administration and politics of Thailand. The failure of the smooth development of extra-bureaucratic political institutions such as political parties, elected legislative assembly, coupled with the prevalence of military coup d'etat have left the Thai bureaucracy with an omnipotent role in the decision-making process and policy formulation of the country. These career bureaucrats especially those on the top echelon have virtually monopolized political and administrative power, running the routines as well as initiating policy. Thus, the argument, now a cliché, that Thailand is a "bureaucratic polity"¹ is a rather accurate description of the situation.

Because of the significance of the Thai bureaucracy in Thai politics and administration, there have been many studies on the subject. However, virtually all of these studies focussed on the structural development of the bureaucracy. It usually started with a description

of the history of Thailand and its administration and ended up with the analysis of how it has evolved to the present situation.² The period prior to the October 14, 1973 political uprising was noted for the proliferation of such studies. While the studies of the bureaucratic organization are not lacking, it is unfortunate that the studies of the bureaucrats are relatively few.³ One cannot help wondering who are those bureaucrats. What are their socio-economic status. ? in other words, what are the socio-economic power-bases of the Thai bureaucratic elite. ? To answer this question, one has look into their family background, their educational training, places of origin or original domicile etc. An examination of these socio-economic status of the high-ranking Thai bureaucrats would reveal a clearer picture of the Thai bureaucracy. It will also help one to infer the relationship between these attributes with their elite status and power. A brief elaboration of this argument is now in order.

In any organization which emphasizes

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¹ Fred Riggs, *Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1966)

² See for example, William Siffin, *The Thai Bureaucracy: Institutional Change and Development* (Honolulu; East-West Center Press, 1966)

³ There are two studies on the Thai bureaucrats (as opposed to the bureaucracy). They are: 1. Likhit Dhiravegin, *Political Attitudes of the Bureaucratic Elite and Modernization in Thailand* (Bangkok: Thai Watana Panich, Co., Ltd., 1972) 2. Likhit Dhiravegin, *The Bureaucratic Elite of Thailand: A Study of their Sociological Attributes, Educational Backgrounds and Career Advancement Pattern* (Bangkok: Thai Khadi Research Institute, 1978)

efficiency and effectiveness, recruitment of men of talents regardless of family background is indispensable. In other words, the criterion for recruitment is achievement, i.e., the ability to do the job (well). If this is the emphasis, then recruitment will have to be an open process whereby any man can stand to be counted. On the contrary, if there is an established tradition or policy of the organization to recruit men of certain family background, ability or talent may be considered of secondary importance. Thus, nepotism or favoritism will be part of the recruitment process of the organization. There is also a high degree of inbreeding. To give one example, in a study of the high-ranking officials of Burma, it was found that 51% had fathers in the civil service and a little over 36% had grandfathers in the civil service.¹

Educational institution where one received training and or the level of education could play an important role in one's bureaucratic career. Recruitment which aims at getting people who are from the same *alma mater* is a common phenomenon in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. Akira Kubota has discovered in his study that the majority of the high-ranking officials of Japan's Ministry of Foreign

Affairs are graduates of Tokyo Imperial University.² In the case of Thailand, in the Ministry of Interior, graduates from Thammasat University used to be predominant although the picture has now changed somewhat. For the bureaucrats, this situation of getting people from the same educational institution one had received training is understandable because graduates from the same school are usually assumed, although incorrectly, that they would have *esprit de corps* and they have a tradition of respect for seniority. This is of course by no means always or even often the case. However, it is an undeniable fact that there exists in society certain advantages if one attended the "right" school and obtained a certain level of training.³

In discussing the socio-economic power-bases of the bureaucratic elite of Thailand, we will focus our discussion on five areas. This includes family background, educational training (institution and level), original domicile or places of origin, religious denomination and sex. These will be clarified as we elaborate our argument. We will support our argument with empirical data which is a result of a research project sponsored by the Ford Foundation.⁴ The study covers the sociological attributes

¹ James F. Guyot, "Bureaucratic Transformation in Burma," in Ralph Braibanti, ed., *Asian Bureaucratic Systems Emergent from the British Imperial Tradition* (Durham, N.C. : Duke University Press, 1966), p. 425, Table IV.

² Akira Kubota, *Higher Civil Servants in Postwar Japan Their Social Origins, Educational Backgrounds and Career Patterns* (Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 1969), *passim*.

³ One cannot deny that, in the United States, to get into the top Ivy League schools such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton or Columbia is one of the highest dreams for many Americans. Graduates of these Universities would have certain advantages when they pursue their career after graduation.

⁴ The results of the research was Published by Thammasat University under the title of *The Bureaucratic, Elite of Thailand : A Study of Their Sociological Attributes, Educational Backgrounds and Career Advancement Pattern, 1978*

of the top-ranking bureaucrats of the Thai civil service, totalling 2160 officials in 12 ministries and a few other agencies. An examination of the information will help substantiate our present discussion as well as providing a clearer picture of the features of the Thai bureaucracy. A discussion of the socio-economic power-bases of the Thai bureaucratic elite is now in order.

I. Socio-economic Power-bases of the Elite

Family Background

Despite the liberal argument that in a modern society, the most important criterion for the recruitment of bureaucrats *should* be achievement (as opposed to ascription), there is no denying that family background still plays an important role in one's success in life. To be sure, there are some examples of the log-cabin president or leaders who spent their childhood in slum, but it could be argued that these are the exceptions rather than the rule. People who are from a "good" family background (being children of the social elites) would have a number of advantages over children who are from a poor family. There are at least three distinctive advantages. First, economic resources which are necessary for the acquisition of a good education. In a number of studies, it has been discovered invariably that because of the long years and heavy expenses required for a highlevel education, (B.A. and upward), to have the minimum resources for such training is indispensable. The story of the young man who is from a poor peasant background in tradi-

tional China who had made it in the state examination and became a high-ranking scholar-official is at best an idealization of the Chinese examination system and its social system in which mobility could be achieved by talents. In reality, one may legitimately question the possibility or plausibility of people from a humble background to have the necessary resources and time to pursue the studies of the Chinese classics necessary for the state examinations. Thus, whether one wants to admit it or not, economic resources are an integral part for technical training which are the basic requirement of a bureaucratic career. To come from a family which has the means is, generally speaking, a *sinequa non*, for getting a job in the bureaucracy.

Apart from the economic resources which we may term physical necessities, there are also the values and attitudes toward education and hence career and success in life. Different social classes vary in value and perception in relation to emphasis on education. One empirical study in the United States shows that there is a differential emphasis among different economic and social classes upon university level education as essential to achievement in life. According to the study, there is a relationship between the emphasis on college education and economic, occupational and educational statuses. The wealthy, the professional and the college graduates emphasized college education for young people much more than the lower groups. Sixty-eight percent of the wealthy and prosperous as compared with 39% of the lower class; 74% of

the professional as compared with 47% of the farmer; and 72% of college graduates as compared with 36% of grammar school graduates emphasized college education for the young as necessary for achievement in life.¹ This differential emphasis upon college education also holds true for children of different classes. The Percentage of children (14–20 years of age), both male and female in wealthy and prosperous families who emphasized the need for college education was higher than those of lower classes.² There were also differential occupational preferences among different classes in the order discusses above.³ One could argue that people from an “upper” class family background would possess the values which encourage them to seek a good education and to become successful in life.

Third, in the world of complex society where impersonalism, ideally speaking, prevails, the most important criterion for the recruitment of personnel or promotion in the bureaucratic position should be personal achievement or talents. However, this is not strictly the case. To have the *right* connection plays a very important part in one’s bureaucratic career. A person from a family whose social status is on the top echelon will have advantages over another person who is from an unknown family. In a country like Thailand where personal ties are still very important, connection would count as an important factor. In the elite circles, everybody knows or

knows of everybody else. One can hardly deny that given the fact that a person from a well-known family and a person with an unknown family who possess equal talent are vying for the same position, it is likely that person with an unknown family background would be at a disadvantage.

To a certain extent this is also the case in an advanced country such as the United States. The story of the Kennedy family is a case in point. Upon reaching college age, members of the Kennedy family would have to choose which ivy league college they want to attend and after graduation, they would have a number of choices for their career. All these are not unrelated the connection the Kennedy family have with other elites in the country. To be sure this is an extreme example. The point we have tried to establish is still that family connection does play a role in one’s success in life, although one cannot overemphasize it.

An examination of the family background of the Thai bureaucratic elite have revealed that the majority of the top ranking civil servants in Thailand come from “good” families. Table I shows that 40.98% of the elite have fathers who are government officials; 31.44% come from business family. Only a small fraction come from a peasant family (5.60%) and worker family (0.81%). Since government officials are generally educated, and to certain extent economically well off while business families

¹ Herbert H. Hyman, “The Value Systems of Different Classes,” in Reinhard Bendix and Seymour Lipset, eds., *Class, Status and Power*, 2nd. ed., (New York : The Free Press, 1966) pp. 488–499, esp., Table I.

² *Ibid.*, Table IV

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 493–495

Table 1. Fathers' Occupation of the Bureaucratic Elite

Fathers' Occupation	Number	Percentage
Civil Servant	725	33.57
Military	103	4.77
Police	41	1.90
Other official	16	0.74
Businessmen	679	31.44
Peasant	121	5.60
Worker	4	0.18
Others	212	9.95
No information	256	11.85
Total	2,160	100.00

Source : Likhit Dhiravegin. *The Bureaucratic Elite of Thailand: A Study of Their Sociological Attributes, Educational Backgrounds and Career Advancement Pattern* (Bangkok : The Thai Khadi Research Institute, Thammasat University, 1978) Table 3.3, P. 61

usually have a better economic stand than the peasants and workers, it could be argued then that the majority of the Thai high-ranking bureaucrats (about 72%) come from a "good" family background. Those small fraction of the sons or daughters of the peasants and workers who made it must have possessed outstanding talents. It is clear from the above figures that despite the oft-quoted story of the successful high-ranking bureaucrats who in their childhood were running around in the paddy fields in the villages are at best a few exceptions. Family background does play an important role in getting one into the top position in the Thai bureaucracy.

The above phenomenon is not unique of Thailand, however, there is a similar situation in Pakistan and Burma. One

study revealed that from 1948 to 1964, nearly 60% of the new recruits to the elite cadre in Pakistan were sons of government officials; 10% were sons of businessmen; the remaining were sons of landlords, teachers, lawyers and physicians. New recruits to the elite cadre with a peasant background were virtually non-existent. All told, about 98.5% of the 388 officials in Pakistan in the study were from professional families.¹ In Burma, as already mentioned from a sample taken in 1962 of civil servants at the selection grade level, which consisted of both the top and the middle-level elites, it was found that 51% had fathers in the civil service, and a little over 36% had grandfathers in the civil service.²

¹ Ralph Braibanti, "The Higher Bureaucracy of Pakistan," in Braibanti, *Op. Cit.*, P. 269. and Table II

² Guyot, *Op. Cit.*

Table II. Educational Level of the Bureaucratic Elite

Educational Level	Number	Percentage
Lower than B.A.	145	6.71
B.A.	1,181	54.67
M.A.	482	22.33
Ph.D.	212	9.82
Military Academy	140	6.48
Total	2,160	100.00

Note : B.A. and above 93.29%
 Foreign-trained 33.10%
 US Trained 71.10%

Source : Dhiravegin, *Op. Cit.*, P. 110, Table 4.1 and p. 124, Table 4.6.

Educational Achievement

Closely related to the family background, educational training is another sociological attribute which forms the basis for the power of the bureaucratic elite. Lipset and Bendix argued that there is a close relationship between educational achievement and occupational achievement in a bureaucratized industrial society.¹ This argument holds true also for the civil servants in Thailand. This is because in a bureaucracy, technical training is necessary for one's career, nepotism and favoritism notwithstanding. Thus, those who have a chance to receive a good education would have the necessary quality to be a successful bureaucrat. Figures in Table II reveal that among the top-ranking civil bureaucrats, 93.29% have a college degree; 33.10% or one-third of them were foreign-trained and of those foreign-trained, 71.10% were educated in the United

States; more than one-fifth (22.23%) hold a Master's degree.

As in the case of the elite's family background, the above situation is not unique of Thailand. A similar situation exists in other countries. For instance the post-war generation civil servants of the selection grade level (top and middle-level) in Burma consisted of 95.80% college graduates.² In a developed country like Japan, 98.80% of the civil servants of level I, II and III (top and middle-level) from 1949-1959 were college graduates.³

The empirical data given above would suggest that a good educational training, a minimum degree (B.A.) is a necessary, although probably not sufficient, condition for the elite status. Nevertheless, with the development of the educational system, the proliferation of universities and college in order to meet the demand of the public, to

¹ Seymour Lipset and Reinhard Bendix, *Social Mobility in Industrial Society* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1967), P. 227

² Guyot, *Op. Cit.*, P. 425, Table VI

³ Kubota, *Op. Cit.*, P. 68, Table XX.

Table III. Educational Institutes of the Locally-trained Elite

Institute	Number	Percentage
Thammasat	649	35.37
Chulalongkorn	405	22.07
Tammasat & Chulalongkorn	12	0.67
Others	769	41.91
Total	1,835	100.00

Source : Dhiravegin, *Op. Cit.*, P. 126, Table 4.7

possess a bachelor's degree is becoming a common phenomenon. Thus, the trend will be that with the progress of time, the educational level of the bureaucratic elite will be higher. It is expected that the number of M.A. and Ph.D. degree holders will increase as competition in the bureaucracy is becoming keener. Institution where one received training, as mentioned before is also important for one's career. There is a tendency in Thailand especially in the bureaucracy to form cliques. The chief of certain bureaucratic agency would prefer to recruit graduates of the same *alma mater* to boost one's position. It is expected that the new comer would show deference to the "big brother" and *esprit de corps* is expected to exist among people who graduated from the same institution. Figures in Table III showed that 35.37% or more than one-third were graduates of Thammasat University. This is because until about 30 years ago, there were two major university which offered courses in social sciences and humanity : Thammasat and Chulalongkorn. Thammasat University was noted for law and political science. Thus, many graduates

would enter civil service, forming the core group in the Thai civil bureaucracy. It is not known how much did favoritism play a part in this situation which led to the predominant number of Thammasat graduates in the bureaucracy. But given the fact that nepotism and favoritism are not uncommon in the Thai bureaucracy, one could argue that the predominant number of Thammasat graduates is not unrelated to favoritism although there may have been some other factors involved. The "others" category which constituted 41.91% included a number of other institutions such as teacher's training colleges, Military academy, etc.,

Places of Origin

Regional Imbalance exists in the recruitment of the bureaucratic personnel. This imbalance may not be intentional. It may have occurred as a natural process reflecting the political and/or social structures of the society. This is especially true in a traditional society where communications facilities are lacking. In a less-developed country where the capital is the primate city, all roads will lead to "Rome". The centralization

Table IV Places of Origin of the Elite

Places of Origin	Number	Percentage	Major City
Central	1,473	68.19	Bangkok 38.70%
North	234	10.84	Chiangmai 2.04%
Northeast	204	9.44	Ubonrajdhani 1.48%
South	238	11.02	Songkla 2.50%
No infromation	11	0.51	
Total	2,160	100.00	

Source : Dhiravegin, *Op. Cit.*, P. 79, Table 3.7.

system will make the capital the center of cultural activities, educational institutions, commercial transactions, etc., The capital city and the peripheral areas would be able the enjoy the advantages offered by the capital city, although in a lesser degree, while the outer areas where travelling a considerable distance is required will be at a disadvantage. The "cradle of civilization" will thus become the breeding ground of the elite. People in the outlying areas would look up to the capital, imitage their life-style, learn to speak the language and decorum of the capital city. They would, if they can afford it, send their children to be educated in the capital city. It is believed that the quality of education in the capital city is superior to those of the provincial institutions. In a nutshell, they will try to emulate the capital city people, It is thus clear that the elite status in the bureaucracy can be related to one's place of origin or geographic position. Table IV showed that almost two-fifths (38.70%) of the elite are originally from Bangkok. Since Bangkok's population of about 5 million constitutes approximately 10.5% of the total population of the country's 46

million, proportionately the 38.70% is very high. This situation is not surprising because as in many other developing countries where there is only one major urban city, the capital, Bangkok is the center of government headquarters, cultural activities, educational institutions, mass media, communications and commerce. The chances for the Bangkok residents to have access to these advantages, especially in education, will far surpass those residents in the provinces. Not surprisingly, many members of the elite are originally residents of the capital city. When the elite is compared by region the number of members of the elite whose places of origin in the central region (68.19%) is predominantly greater than those of all other regions combined despite the fact that the combined population of those region is almost twice as many as those of the central region. The basic factor accounting for the prefominant number of members of the elite from the central region is geographic proximity to the capital city. There is no question that it is convenient and less costly for those in the central region to go to school in Bangkok. People who live close to

Table V. Religious Denomination of the Bureaucratic Elite

Religion	Number	Percentage
Buddhism	2,003	92.73
Islam	6	0.27
Christianity	7	0.32
Others	-	-
No information	144	6.67
Total	2,160	100.00

Source : Dhiravegin, *Op. Cit.*, P. 102, Table 3.19

the capital city are privileged, although probably to a lesser extent than the Bangkok residents. They live close to the educational and cultural centers and thus have more access to modernity than those who live in the farther areas. The findings suggest that there is an association between social mobility and geographic location. The closer to the capital city one lives, the better chance one has for education and hence, other things being equal, occupational achievement.

Religious Denomination

Despite the liberal advocate of freedom of religious worship, which has become a world-wide fashion, it is undeniable that of all the prejudices exist in human society, religion and race or ethnicity are the two most strong prejudices. When John F. Kennedy was running for the presidency, there were misgivings that his being a Catholic might subject the United States under the Vatican. The violent conflicts between the Moslems and the Hindus in India, the violent clashes between the Buddhists and Christians in South Vietnam are just a few examples of pro-

blems stemming from religious prejudices.

Although all Thais are free to take any religions as their faith, it is taken for granted that the Thai are generally Buddhists. Despite the fact that the King is the patron of all religions, he himself has to be a Buddhist. In the bureaucratic organization, religious affiliation are usually tolerated. However, in practice, it would be inconvenient for a non-Buddhist high-ranking bureaucrat to carry out the bureaucratic functions. This is because in many functions, Buddhist ceremonies are part of them. For example, opening ceremonies for training courses, ceremony marking the opening of new buildings or offices, diploma presentation ceremonies after graduation, etc. will be carried out with the trilogy—the nation, religion and the King as the essential part of the ceremonies. The setting will consist of a national flag representing the nation an altar with a Buddhist statue representing religion but invariably Buddhism and the portrait of His Majesty the King. As part of the ceremony, the head of the bureaucratic agency will light the joss-sticks and pay respect to the statue

Table VI Sex Distribution of the Bureaucratic Elite

Sex	Number	Percentage
Male	1,926	89.16
Female	234	10.84
Total	2,160	100.00

Source : Dhiravegin, *Op. Cit.*, P. 95, Table 3.15

of the Buddha. Under this situation, it is apparent that the non-Buddhist bureaucrats will find himself in an awkward situation. Thus, willy nilly, it would be preferable that the bureaucratic head is a Buddhist. Figures in Table V indicate clearly that the majority of the high-ranking bureaucrats called themselves Buddhists. This is in line with the fact that the majority of the Thai people are Buddhists. Our findings reflect the proportion of the number of the Thai who are Buddhists. Be that as it may, the case still stands that being a Buddhist is a plus in an environment in which people of other religious faith may find themselves experiencing certain inconveniences as we have described above.

Sex Distribution

Discrimination against female has been argued to exist in all societies including the advanced and "liberal" countries in the West. Thailand is no exception. However, it must be pointed out here immediately that in a number of a rear Thai women enjoy more freedom than their Western counterparts. It is customary, for instance for Thai women to completely control the fi-

nances of the family. There are a few women who have become successful in business and to a lesser extent in the bureaucracy. However, in the bureaucracy, as to be expected, women are outnumbered by men. Figures in Table VI clearly substantiate our point. Among the high-ranking bureaucrats, only about 10% are female. And of the female, the majority of these bureaucrats are University instructors or educationists in the Ministry of Education.¹ The number of female bureaucrats in such Ministry as the Interior which deals with the government and administration of the country is small.² This is partly due to the nature of the work the bureaucrats have to undertake. In the Ministry of Interior, the work is somewhat adventurous which requires some martial spirits. For example, district officer has to run after the law-breakers like a policeman. They may be assigned to certain stations which are far away from the capital city which requires physical toughness when carrying out duty in the rural area. Not surprisingly, not so many women joined the organization and for those who have, it is highly probable that their chance for promotion to the top post

¹ Dhiravegin, *The Thai Bureaucratic Elite*, P. 98, Table 3.17

² *Ibid.*

is smaller than their male counterparts. The few female personnel there are in the bureaucracy are mostly teachers or those who are engaged in desk work rather than fieldwork. It is thus no denying that cultural or social values play an important part in this phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

The five sociological attributes, family background, education, place of origin, religion and sex are the underlying attributes contributing to the status and power of the bureaucratic elite. Some of these attributes, place of origin, for example, may not be significant after the bureaucrat has begun his career. The importance of it lies in the fact that the area close to Bangkok enjoys the advantages especially education which is a contributory factor for the elite's status. The most important two factors, it could be argued, are family background and education. The latter is almost a derivative of the former. For as we have argued, it takes a considerable amount of resources for anyone to go through the process of formal training in a university. The children of the poor peasants could hardly make it for the compulsory education, or high school, let alone college education. A good education is thus closely related to one's family background. In Thailand, the two groups of people who are economically better off are the businessmen and to a lesser degree, government officials. These two groups of people can afford this expensive enterprise of providing a good education for their children which in turn will lead to a better job and social status.

There is also the advantage of family connection in the process of recruitment and later on in the career.

Religious faith also plays a part in the status and power of the bureaucratic elite. The appropriate religious denomination, Buddhism, helps facilitates one's bureaucratic career although it may not be the most significant factor. That the majority of the bureaucrats are male is a matter of fact and it could be argued that this is a worldwide phenomenon which needs no further elaboration.

In a developing country like Thailand where there is a great need for talented people to work in the bureaucracy, recruitment should be universalistic which has been the case theoretically speaking. However, the process of having a formal education in order to possess the right qualifications to compete for admission into the bureaucracy is a long and expensive one. A good education presupposes a bureaucratic career. Thus, the poor and the underprivileged are automatically dropped out from the competition. Of the few who made it may later encounter the difficulties of having no family connection. To make the system more open, the country has to provide some form of open politics in which limited formal training is needed for job concerning with public affairs. This is the case of elected legislative assembly. The basic qualifications are not set very high and the process of getting into the position of power could be short-cut. Another policy which has been adopted by many governments is to provide opportunity for the poor to have access to univer-

sity education. Open universities such as Ram Kham-haeng or Sukhothaitham-mathirach are cases in point. However, this has to be carried out in line with economic development which aims at closing the gap between the rich and the poor. This is because no matter how equal the opportunity exists in educational institution, the basic needs of a certain family have to be met before one can talk about education and social

mobility. If one lives day through day, living from hand to mouth, it is futile to talk about the future, mobility and the like. There are reasons to believe that things are moving toward a more liberal situation in the bureaucracy and hopefully for open politics. But for the time being and the foreseeable future, our argument and finding will remain tenable.