

# Guidelines to Improve Public Service Administration for Thailand Reform: Reflections from the Northeast

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## ABSTRACT

This research is based on a synthesis from a reconciliation forum for the country's reform in Khon Kaen province, northeast Thailand. The purpose of the study is to identify conflicts and development issues in the area; investigate the need for reform in various sectors at both local and national levels, and explore alternatives or guidelines to improve public service administration for the country's reform. Data was collected using qualitative research tools including focus group, dialogue, and open-ended questionnaires. The target groups consisting of 3,200 people who is living in Khon Kaen province and other 204 professionals consisting of 61 representatives from the government sector, 39 from the private sector, 33 from education sector, 22 from in the political sector and 49 from civil society sector. The results revealed that in order to diminish conflicts, reconciliation must occur at both the community and the national level. In addition, many aspects of public service administration and public policy must also be reformed; especially those involved in politics and political institutions, ethical standards of politicians and government officials, Criminal Justice System and administration, systematic corruption, education system, economic structure and income distribution; information and data management, as well as other issues stem from inequality in the society.

## Keywords

Thailand Reform, Public Service Administration, Reconciliation

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## Introduction

Due to the political turmoil in the country since 2009, especially in late 2013 when there was a demonstration to overthrow the government, violence has been continuously provoked all over Thailand and resulted in casualties and the loss of property of citizen and government agencies. During pre-election week in January 2014, violence between the pro and the anti-government protesters was escalated into riots where bombs and war weapons were used to injured and killed citizens including women and children. The damage caused by this violence has organizations such as the Human Rights Commission, Human Rights Watch, UNICEF, as well as institutions working on human rights and peace studies across the country to issued statements seeking for reconciliation and peace talk [1] These efforts not only failed miserably but the conflict had also seemed to expand wider, especially as each party called for their supporters' uprising during the election week.

Finally, on May 22, 2014, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) led by General Prayut Chan-o-cha had staged the coup attempting to gain the administrative power before the situation escalates out of control and cause a broader impact both economically, socially and politically in all sectors. In this effort to control the societal conflict and achieve reconciliation, Head of the NCPO General Prayut Chan-o-cha has emphasized the three-phase roadmap and timeframe for administering the country. During the first phase, General Prayut stated that provisional measures will be introduced to deal with the national reconciliation process in preparation for national reform. In the second phase, after the enforcement of the interim constitution in July, the reform will be conducted in all areas involves such issues as the prevention and suppression of corruption, politics, high-level administrative processes, the exercise of

power, the justice system, independent organizations, energy, mass communication, education, morality and ethics, economic and social equity, and access to natural resources. The reform process will begin after the formation of a government, the National Assembly, and the National Reform Council. And in the third phase, after the permanent constitution is in effect, Thailand may once again be regarded as a nation governed by a democratic administration, with His Majesty the King as Head of State [2].

During the first phase of national reform which involves the establishment of the National Legislative Assembly and the National Reform Council, the formation of a government, and the drafting of a new constitution, reconciliation forums for the country's reform were organized throughout Thailand in order to identify and seek options for reconciliation and peace, and to guide that choice in direction of national reform based on the needs of people of all sectors [3]. For the Northeast region of Thailand, a forum for reconciliation was organized at the sub-district administration and at the municipality of Khon Kaen Province.

## Purpose Of The Study

This research is based on a synthesis from a reconciliation forum for the country's reform in Khon Kaen province, Thailand. The purpose of the study are to identify conflicts and development issues in the area; investigate the need for reform in various sectors at both local and national levels, and explore alternatives or guidelines to improve public service administration for the country's reform. The findings of this study will offer suggestions to The National Reform Council and the Constitution Drafting Committee to resolve the root cause of conflict in various aspects such as in

politics, economic, social matters, the environment, and the judicial process.

### Research Methodology

Data was collected using qualitative research tools including focus group, dialogue, and open-ended questionnaires. The target groups consisting of 3,200 people who is living in Khon Kaen province and other 204 professionals consisting of 61 representatives from the government sector, 39 from the private sector, 33 from education sector, 22 from in the political sector and 49 from civil society sector.

### Research Findings

Findings include participants' understanding, attitude, and suggestions synthesized from the outcomes of reconciliation forum organized in Khon Kaen Province can be summarized into various aspects as follows:

#### Politics and Democracy

Majority of the representative samples still do not really understand the real essence of democratic government and democracy. Political parties are not strong and the electoral votes can be bought at all levels; therefore the lack of competent politicians to run the country and populist policies are often emphasizes in political campaigns. The result also shows that people in the northeast area of Thailand still does not truly understand the roles and duties of politicians and still have a political culture that is attached to the patronage system. Many of the participants revealed that they are fully comfortable with the fact that politicians lack morality or even corrupt as long as the benefits are mutual.

#### Patronage system and conflict of interests

Majority of forum participants understand that politicians at all levels and high-level government officials are affiliated under the patronage system. Politicians will form allies in administration agencies in order to exploit public resources. This can be seen as a pyramid of ethical problems in which the ill ethics of leaders descending to the lower levels, causing the moral system to decline. The problem of corruption is perceived as widespread and difficult to fix although conflict of interests is acceptable if some benefits are spared for the public.

#### Criminal Justice System and Juridical Process

Over the years, Thailand's criminal justice system and juridical process has been subject to criticism about its double standard, unfairness, and discrimination. Participants' had thought of the Court as prejudiced and brought the Court to the level of local politicians or civil servants, who the public disdains for their alleged self-interest. Public sector agrees that the legal process in Thailand tends to be slow and litigants or other third parties sometimes affect judgments through extra-legal means, while businesses admit that irregular payments and bribes are commonly offered in order to obtain favorable judicial

decisions. In addition, other courts that are political and politicized, such as the Constitutional Court, have also lost public trust, especially when the Constitutional Court has taken politically decisive verdicts that went against one side and favored the other. The whole judiciary, in short, does not inspire confidence among the Thai people.

#### Public service administration and public policy

Corruption among public officials, fueled by low wages and a cultural inclination to accept gifts as a natural part of "getting things done" are cited as the most problematic factors for inefficient government bureaucracy and government instability. Majority of the interviewee agrees that the country's public administration structures are duplicated or overlapped between regional and local agencies, causing conflicts and non-coordination between government agencies in central, regional and local government organizations. The responsible organizations and officials in public policy formation and implementation process lacks of ethical standard not only hinder effectiveness in public service provision but also lead to other moral issues while penalties for corrupted government officials and politicians are relatively weak.

#### Education System

Two main problems of Thai education system expressed in the forum are poor quality of education and education inequality. The current curriculum was not effective while the teaching patterns of each school are inconsistent. Parents tend to send their children to study in the city, forcing students to travel to school for longer distances and causing small schools in rural area to close down. Teachers lack student-centered teaching skills and current curriculum does not focus on students being self-reliant. In addition, the indicators of educational quality were misplaced; emphasizing heavily on the teachers' amount work instead of the academic performance of the student.

#### Economic Structure

The Thai economy is troubled on both the demand and supply sides. Domestic consumption is plagued with a high level of household debt and poverty causing labor migration to big cities. The gap between the rich and the poor are wide due to the inequality in income and wealth distribution. Prices of consumer goods and utilities are continued to rise while prices of agricultural products are lowered. Other economic issues that have been mentioned include foreign labor problem, minimum wage reconsideration, informal debt, unemployment, and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) investment opportunity.

#### Data and information distribution

Participants of the panel agreed that news dissemination of the mass media nowadays has a great impact on attitudes and opinions of Thai society. Therefore, media presentations or dissemination of information in a favorable or supportive manner to a specific political group can definitely be perceived as a political campaign. Some of the media

channels spreading fake news or using words that cause negative attitudes, resulting in more conflicts in society, were broadcasted without any warning from the responsible government organizations. There are also problems of data and information unequal distribution when the internet does not cover many areas of the country, especially in remote villages, and therefore some group of people do not have access to useful information which can be seen as a disparity in technology and information.

### **Natural Resource Management**

Many issues concerning natural resource management were mentioned in the focus group and interview which includes the intensified invasion of public forests, parks, national forests, and illegal logging, the existing water supply is lacking in maintenance or development, causing problems in the use of water for human consumption and agriculture, repeated droughts, water pollution, soil deterioration, waste management, as well as the lack of people's participation in local resource management.

### **Suggestion**

From the discussions for reconciliation and reform of Thailand among community forums and professional groups in Khon Kaen Province, it can be briefly summarized as recommendations which require the most urgent actions for policy planning and reform of Thailand's public service administration as follows:

#### **1) Political Process**

1. The Recruitment for Political positions, at both national and local levels, must requires an election from the people, while the term in the office must be set and does not exceed two terms or 8 years consecutively.
2. A learning process and appreciation of democratic government must be enforced by requiring democracy and Thai political history along with Thai culture for the youths, from kindergarten to Higher education level.
3. There should be clear and concrete policies or measures that enable people to examine the operations of local government organizations and politicians at all levels, including measures to monitor the vote selling and buying process.
4. The definition of the reforms must be clear, accepted and recognized by people at all levels, and must be reviewed at every phase while the first and foremost short term goal is to have a transparent election. Mistakes, if any, must be accepted bravely by the involving officials.

#### **2) Ethical Standards of Politicians and Government Officials**

1. A process to recruit and screen politicians and government officials at all levels must be reconsidered. Moral and ethical principles must be emphasized as a key element in the consideration while patronage system must be eliminated.
2. The quality of Thai civil servants and politicians must be developed to have a sense of working for the public

and common interests at heart; not just taking advantage of temporary power

3. The problem of corruption at every level must be resolved urgently and must be perceived as an important agenda of the nation reform. Enforcement of severe penalties must be enacted in order to set the example and change this deep-rooted political culture.

4. An independent organization or special mechanism should be established to conduct ethical background checks among a politician or government official before taking any position in the office.

#### **3) Criminal Justice System and Administration**

1. Rebuild the people's faith in courts and justice system by eliminating the loopholes and corruption in law enforcement, criminal litigation, and all the process of taking legal action.
2. Procedures in the judicial process should be simplified, shortened, and must be accurately and transparently execute.
3. Lawyers, attorneys, barristers, and other law enforcement officers need to understand and adhere to the principles of law to the same standards in order to establish a fair judicial process.
4. Cultivating the mindset of the people to respect the law rather than making new laws and fail to enforce them.

#### **4) Public Management**

1. People participation must be emphasized in public administration at all levels
2. Central government should consider decentralization in the form of Self-Governing Province to create self-reliance development among local administrations.
3. Simplify bureaucratic system by removing cumbersome procedures and repeal backward or irrelevance laws and regulations in public service provision.
4. Governments should not overlook the voices of the people in public affairs and should encourage citizen's engagement in the decision-making process, such as in public hearings.
5. Government agencies need to be modified to work in a more proactive manner to keep up with the increasingly complex and diverse needs of people and to keep pace with the competitive adaptation in the globalization era.
6. Human security issues should be valued as the country's top priority, especially the employment opportunities and the appropriate welfare for people with disabilities and the elderly.

#### **5) Education System**

1. Promote fair and equal access to education at all levels especially the basic education that should be accessible without any restrictions.
2. The Ministry of Education should pay more attention to the qualification of the teachers and examine the quality teachers more frequently by giving examination or establish the measurements for teacher's assessment. For

teachers who do not pass the standard, the rule of retirement before 60 years old should be open to be applied.

3. School semesters in Thailand should be based on the agricultural harvest season rather than relying on other ASEAN country conditions. Not only because the culture differences between each nation, but also because the differences of the environment and seasonal change. More importantly, parents will then be able to have more time with their children off the harvest season.

4. Incentives, welfare, and fringe benefits of teachers and support personnel in all levels of education must be increased equally, fairly, and compatible with workloads and cost of living.

## 6) Economic Structure

1. The government must set up an agency responsible for determining the prices of important agricultural products such as rice, cassava, and other seasonal crops. In which farmers can take part in their own product price setting while reducing the middleman influences in the agricultural trade.

2. Improve land policy and practices to mitigate land ownership inequality in order to deter the increasing number in landless or land-poor farmers in the country.

3. The government must establish economic policies to concretely link the industry to agriculture to create jobs and skills for agricultural workers.

4. There should be a process to increase small farmer's agricultural bargaining power in bargaining with entrepreneurs or traders in determining the fairer product pricing.

## 7) Data and Information

1. The government should have a clear and concrete policy to regulate the media that will lead to inciting conflicts by stricter enforcement of the law

2. The media has to reform itself in acting impartial, disseminating news and knowledge that is beneficial to the people in a straightforward manner.

3. People still lack information for business investments, especially the SME, which is considered a business investment that the state should encourage and support.

4. The government must extend Internet connection to cover all areas of the country so that all Thai can access information instantly and equally.

In addition, this study also reveals that people is hoping that religious organizations such as temples should get involve and play a role as a pacifier. In other words, religious organizations are expected to be responsible for guiding the society to a smooth reform, reduce social conflict, and reverts faith to the society in solving problems together as a Thai in a peaceful way. It is crucial that to reform a country following the NCPO's Roadmap, there must be an emphasis on building reconciliation between political conflict groups by raising awareness and mindset of reconciliation rather than enforcing a command reconcile. Long term peace needed to be established, not to be forced.

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